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ON NOT BEING A FAN: MASCULINE IDENTITY, DVD CULTURE AND THE ACCIDENTAL COLLECTOR

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Abstract: Recent work on DVD and home cinema technologies, audience and the context of reception has tended to focus on fandom, privileging the fanaticism that underpins the etymology of that term. This article is premised on focus group work that suggests, in counterpoint, that many contemporary collectors of DVDs do not see themselves as ‘fans’. What does this mean for the discourses that are developing around the consumption of new media technologies and their role in everyday life? Drawing on interview material, this article discusses the relationship between Western masculinity and the phenomenon of DVD collection. It considers the pleasures of this activity alongside the spaces of resistance it produces and we argue that commentary that interprets such phenomena in terms of fetishism does not account fully enough for what is at stake. Drawing on object relations psychoanalysis, we suggest that the material object of the DVD works in tandem with its psychical equivalent to produce new spaces of exploration and creativity for men. Against the backdrop of the commonplace assumption that masculinity is in ‘crisis’, we suggest that men make use of technologies to forge new spaces of interaction with one another, arguing that this creates new formations through which to think about the cultural structuration of homosociality and its creative potential.

Recent work on DVD and home cinema technologies, audience and the context of reception has tended to focus on fandom, privileging the fanaticism that underpins the etymology of that term. Scholars such as Tashiro (1996), Dinsmore-Tuli (1998), Bjarkman (2004), Kendrick (2005) and Klinger (2006) interrogate what is at stake for fan-consumers who spend large proportions of their time and income on collecting and archiving television and cinema in the home. Paying special attention to VHS and DVD cultures, these scholars foreground the ways in which fan-behaviour requires certain modes of cultural capital and expertise in order to ‘count’

as authentic and valuable. For example, in his work on the use of the internet to forge fan communities, James Kendrick (2005) signals the elitism at play in the attitudes of collectors around their preferred media technologies and formats. He notes that the obsession with the technical specification of both films and the technology on which they can be viewed in the home becomes a prime signifier of expertise in the field and therefore of the legitimacy of the contributor. What is at stake here is the importance of mastery and its role in enabling the formation of a certain modality of subjectivity.

By contrast, Kim Bjarkman (2004) suggests that such behaviour also gives rise to a certain experience of ambivalence. For example, she highlights issues around the ugliness of VHS tapes, the difficulty of housing large collections of them and the problems arising from attempts to index and catalogue collections in order to make them accessible as archives. In her account, this produces a level of frustration for those who partake in such activities because of the inevitable impossibility of completing collections and the consequent endless deferral of any sense of satisfaction that might therefore arise from the activity in itself. Despite this apparent ambivalence, however, it is worth noting that the image of the obsessive fanaticism remains dominant in her account. Likewise, in Barbara Klinger's extensive work around home cinema technology ownership (1998; 2006), a similar picture emerges. Through extended analysis of industry advertisements and newspaper, magazine and web articles, Klinger sets out her view that the home cinema enthusiast and the contemporary cinephile are, in the main, constructed through the intense appeal of the marketplace that hails them as experts in cinema and masters of technology. The assumptions about the desire for mastery that permeate the advertisements for the technologies available for home film viewing creates a sense of symbolic superiority in its largely male demographic of consumers (2006: 46) according to Klinger, and this extends to the symbolic capital associated with mastery over machines in the home.

Implicit in all of this work is the notion of fetishism as inherent to the type of obsessive collecting that can be labelled as fandom (Kendrick 2005; Klinger 2006; Hight 2005). This is well illustrated perhaps in the writings of Charles Tashiro, who observes that

Discs do not wear; tapes lose their lustre with each pass over the heads. It is precisely *because* discs are permanent that they have the allure of the static,

self-contained art work, the mystique of preservation, fragility that must be maintained, isolated, *revered*. Since the eventual destruction of a videotape is inevitable, it can be treated badly from the first. Discs offer the seductiveness of immortality, however illusory, and invite our complicity in the cheating of Death (1996: 13).

Of the course the links between fetishism and collecting are well documented in cultural studies, where it is often argued that collecting is linked to the cultural economy of consumption and commodity fetishism (Fiske 1990; Gamman and Makinen 1994). As Lury and others argue, the practice of consumption is always a dual process, involving doing and undoing, producing and destroying -- a duality which mirrors the processes of disavowal that constitute fetishism in its various forms. In their critical review of the term 'fetishism' and its application, Gamman and Makinen (1994) usefully delineate three broad contexts in which the term fetishism has been applied: commodity production, anthropological fetish rituals and psychoanalytic discussions of sexuality.

The concept of commodity fetishism has been a key theme in the history of consumer studies and is highly suggestive when discussing the possessive pleasures of DVD audiences and consumers. Of course the term 'commodity fetishism' is most readily associated with a Marxist, production-led explanation of consumer behaviour, in which all acts of consumption are seen as an effect of the capitalist mode of production (Marx 1990). From a Marxist perspective, consumer goods become 'reified' (Lukács 1971) and take on a 'magical' quality' (Williams 1980), divorced from the actual 'use-value' of the products themselves and the conditions of their production.¹ Instead, the meanings of goods and our attachment to them are shaped by the symbolic systems of marketing and advertising imagery (Fiske 1991; Williamson 1978, 1986). Today, in a post-industrial capitalist context, where the signifying system has apparently become un-hinged from its moorings in 'real' objects (Baudrillard 1981), it is often argued that the fetishistic processes of disavowal are now linked inextricably to the shaping of subjectivities in everyday cultural life. What are the pleasures at stake here and are they always already reducible to the status of a fetish?

In the psychoanalytic account, fetishism is defined as an exclusively masculine perversion and signifies a strategy (albeit a problematic one) through which

to deal with sexual difference and the losses of masculinity (Freud 1927). Of course, this link between fetishistic behaviour and masculinity does seem very pertinent in the context of DVD fan cultures because of the widely acknowledged disproportionately male demographic associated with it. As we shall go on to discuss, this can be linked to the widespread perception that masculinity is in 'crisis', suggesting that fetishism is used as a defensive response to the anxieties about the fragility of masculinity (Authors 2005, 2007; Author 2007). However, it is important to draw attention to the fact that the consumption of DVD technologies is now very widespread and DVDs are so easily accessed that they feature in the lives of everyday consumers whose lives are *not* regimented by any fetishistic and/or ritualistic compulsion to collect. Instead, what seems to be at stake is a notion of everyday pleasure and its ordinariness. Against such a backdrop, it seems imperative to differentiate between collecting as a fanatical activity, with all its connotations of fetishism (and therefore of failing masculinity) and collecting as something much more creative and of the everyday. Here, collecting becomes a means of forging relatedness through which subjectivity is shaped in relation to others through an active engagement with both material external objects (such as DVDs) and internal psychological ones.

This article seeks to scrutinise how gender inflects such a paradigm of identity and can be theorised with reference to a less defensive mode of psychoanalytic thinking in which creativity and process are foregrounded in the formation of a sense of self. In this paper, we explore the implications of these tensions. We scrutinise films and their receptive contexts and the affective responses of male consumers by drawing on interview material. Our approach seeks to move beyond the limits of a purely textual methodology to explore simultaneously the processes and experiences of consumption in everyday life. Our paper is influenced by recent work done on the importance of reading texts in relation to their textual and cultural contexts (Austin 2002; Staiger 2005). However, it also seeks to move beyond this by examining the affects and fantasies that underpin both spheres of analysis.

To do this, we return to films about which we have written from a textual perspective on previous occasions (Authors 2005, 2007) with a view to exploring their continuing appeal to young men for whom DVD collecting can be characterised as a mode of the everyday as explored above, and we do this through a number of focus groups.ⁱⁱ The films in question are *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese 1976) and *Memento* (Nolan 2000), both of which are now widely available as special collector's edition

boxed sets and thus continue to be watched beyond their period of cinematic release.ⁱⁱⁱ We also discuss *American Beauty* (Mendes 1999) and *Gladiator* (Scott 2000), as these films were repeatedly mentioned in the focus group sessions as being especially relevant for the respondents. It is fascinating that these particular films frequently appear in popular lists of ‘classic’ or ‘must-see’ films. For example, at the time of the interviews, on the gender-differentiated internet movie database list of ‘Top Titles as Rated by Male Users’, *Taxi Driver* and *Memento* appeared in the top thirty two selections, and *Gladiator* also appeared albeit lower down the list (www.imdb.co.uk). Of course, the promotion of ‘classic’ films through such lists cannot be separated from the processes of the market and the global market context of the late capitalist era (Featherstone 1991; Lury 1996). However, the relationship between the consumption of films, DVDs and the market in this context is, as we have begun to argue, more complex than a manipulative model of consumption implies (Campbell 1987; Storey 1999).

Paying attention to the themes of the films themselves and also to the materiality of the DVD as an object of desire, together with other extra-textual elements of consumption (such as websites), we draw on interview material to interrogate the fantasies underlying the appeal of these films to young men in the contemporary British context. The men in question regularly purchase and view films on DVD but also proactively reject the label of ‘fan’. This raises a number of interesting questions about how we might theorise the relationship between masculinity and this mode of collecting, which is distinctively *not* obsessive or fetishistic but which might be defined as happenstance or perhaps even ‘accidental’.

The regressive pleasures of collecting are a recurring theme in studies of DVD and VHS consumption (Bjarkman 2004: 222) and Walter Benjamin’s paper ‘Unpacking my Library’ (1992) is often cited as a landmark essay in this respect. Benjamin writes about the ‘childlike element’ of collecting, working as a ‘form of renewal’ as in other ‘childish pursuits such as painting of objects and the cutting out of figures’ (1992: 63). As Benjamin and others describe, the pleasures of collecting involve a wide range of subjective experiences and emotions that include the enjoyment of anticipation, the reassurance of touching and holding familiar artefacts such as a favourite film, the thrill and surprise of finding and handling new, aesthetically pleasing objects; or the poignant pleasure of being close to objects that carry aspects of the self in terms of their history and memory and which may bear

intense personal meaning. In this account, then, collecting is not equated with fetishism; nor is it seen a mode of psychological defence.

Yet despite the intense emotional investment implied by such activity, contemporary studies of DVD collecting have tended to skirt around its psychical function in relation to the formation of subjectivities. This is, perhaps, unsurprising given the reluctance to apply psychoanalytic theory more generally to aspects of popular culture, particularly within the tradition of empirical audience and consumer research.^{iv} When in the past, issues of consumption, subjectivity and fantasy have been addressed – as for example in relation to cinema and spectatorship (Mulvey 1975, 2006), or through the irrational desires and longings stirred up the discourses and practices of consumption (Bocock 1993) - these have been discussed mainly through the language of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Such accounts ignore the usefulness of other psychoanalytic approaches such as object relations, which can provide particular insights into the experience of using objects beyond the realms of textual and contextual analysis.^v

However, there is arguably more to DVD consumption than the desire for mastery. Object relations theory, with its emphasis on creativity and the imaginary possibilities of play, can by contrast, be used in place of Freudian and Lacanian models, to produce a more nuanced understanding of the psychosocial processes that mediate the relationship between the shaping of masculine subjectivities and the desire to collect and consume DVD technologies. Donald Winnicott (1965, 1971) is significant figure in the history of object relations and, in particular, his theory of ‘transitional phenomena’ is useful for exploring aspects of cultural experience (Authors 2005; Hills 2002; Mitchell 2009; Richards 1994; Silverstone 1994; Author 2000; Young 1989;).

Winnicott relates the adult experience of culture to the ‘transitional phenomena’ of infancy and the transitional ‘me – not me’ spaces that emerge between mother and child for communication and play. The psychical significance of such spaces, in which subjectivities are continually made and re-made, and which, in developmental terms, allows the child to let go of the omnipotent illusions of narcissism, remains with the subject throughout his or her life. As Val Richards argues:

For the Winnicott child, it is through playing: with the m/other, with objects, and alone, that the baby progresses. This playing becomes linked to all later forms of meaning making, of playing in art and culture. In contrast with Freudian and Kleinian theories of the origins of art and culture as defensive against anxiety, playing and symbolic development are equated by Winnicott with creativity and aliveness' (2005: 19).

The first transitional object is the m/other who acts as a facilitator for the child's emerging sense of creativity (Bollas 1987). These transitional qualities are later projected onto a comforting material object such as a teddy bear, and constitute a psychological bridge between the child's inner and outer worlds, militating against loss and separation anxiety. An important aspect of experiencing transitional phenomena is that the child believes that it has created the object itself, thus enabling the child to take pleasure in its own sense of mastery. As the psychoanalyst, Christopher Bollas, argues:

In a sense, the use of a transitional object is the infant's first creative act, an event that does not merely display an ego capacity – such as grasping – but which indicates the infant's subjective experience of such capacities (1987:15).

As in the quotation from Bollas, Winnicott emphasised that the pleasures of mastery are often experienced in physical terms, as the infant takes pleasure in the sensual feel, smell and taste of the object (for instance the soft toy or a piece of rag). The psychological processes that underpin transitional phenomena are experienced through the use of objects in adult life, most obviously perhaps in the sphere of the creative arts (see Milner 1950; Richards 2005). Yet there has been less research into the application of Winnicott's ideas to the everyday experience of consumer and media cultures. Interestingly, however, Matt Hills (2002) has applied the notion of the transitional object to his study of fan cultures. He argues that 'A fan culture is formed around any given text when this text has functioned as a primary transitional object in the biography of a number of individuals' (108). Yet the experience of fandom as an embodied *consumer* activity is not explored by Hills. What happens, for example,

when consumers take similar pleasures in a text but do not define themselves as fans as such?

Barry Richards (1994) and Robert Young (1989) have used Winnicott's ideas to address the sensory experience of consumer goods and their function as transitional objects. Both Richards and Young explore the ways in which consumer goods such as music can work in a transitional manner, providing a sensory link between our inner and outer worlds. An object relations approach is particularly apt when discussing the pleasures of music and the related technologies that have emerged since Young's 1989 paper. In contrast to conventional forms of textual analysis, Winnicott's ideas can be applied to discuss the sensual experience of listening to music, where the external sound is internalised to form an imaginary transitional bridge between the self and the object. Such an experience can also be applied to the consumption of other technologies, as discussed here. Understanding the DVD as a transitional object, one can point to the regressive pleasures of collecting, watching and experiencing DVDs alone, or in a social context, where the DVDs take on a particular symbolic resonance, functioning as facilitators for the self and creating potential spaces for play. As we discuss below, our respondents evoke this process at work when they discuss the pleasures of DVD collection, both in terms of the materiality of the object, and also through the playful experience of shifting between the primary and secondary texts, which now often constitute the viewing experience. We have in mind here the myriad special features that are now standard on most commercially available special edition DVDs. These range from interviews with directors and actors, photographs, hidden 'easter egg' special features including games and access to handwritten scripts and notes etc and the embossed covers of the DVDs themselves, which often also have posters and postcards included.

A recurring motif of object relations theory is the way in which objects and things are used to shape and affirm one's identity and to mediate one's relations with the outside world. Of course such practices do not occur in an historical or cultural vacuum and a significant theme of Winnicott's work is the significance of the environment in facilitating the emergence of the creative self.^{vi} Today, it is widely acknowledged that, in Euro-American societies, the values and practices of consumerism have become dominant (Featherstone 1991; Lury 1996). The practice of collecting and the desire to possess things is now generally perceived to be a defining

feature of that culture, where, as Lury (1996: 7) argues, the ethos of 'to have is to be' has now become dominant.

Whilst recognising the usefulness of commodity fetishism in the analysis of DVD consumption and gendered subjectivities, there is a danger that contemporary re-workings of it (as in the work of Baudrillard for example), provide a flattened, postmodern vision of the self, which loses sight of the complex and paradoxical relationship between self and object and the tensions that lie within that relationship.^{vii} The ritualistic aspects of fandom and collecting are addressed by John Fiske's (1992) research into the cultural economy of fandom. He uses the work of Bourdieu to emphasise the working class links to popular fan behaviour and argues that the fan knowledge accrued by such fans should be seen as a form of cultural capital. Gamman and Makinen (1994) relate this model of fandom, which focuses on issues of identity and the use of goods as markers of belonging, to their paradigm of 'anthropological fetishism'. They argue that this mode of fetishism evokes a form of religiosity in the rituals that take place around the star, as when fans create sacred spaces to worship the star in question.

Yet just as the motivations of fans and collectors of DVDs cannot be reduced to a Marxist model of market-led manipulation or the aesthetic lure of the commodity sign,^{viii} nor can one link the behaviour of everyday (casual) collectors to the reification of DVDs as mystical, religious objects, to be worshipped on the totemic altars of home movie theatres. The motivations and feelings of such collectors are often more ambivalent and complicated. Interestingly, the label of 'fan' with all its connotations of slavish devotion to a particular star, show or film, is one that consumers of such products often wish to distance themselves from.^{ix} Fiske's (1992) research into fandom identifies such reticence as a bourgeois distancing device, and contrasts it to an apparently 'proletarian' enthusiasm for popular culture. Yet the term 'fan' also has a number of feminising connotations, which can be off-putting for male consumers. For instance, as we discuss below, the respondents in our study showed a distinct reluctance to associate themselves with the term fan, largely because of its feminine associations. Here, the fan is seen as being someone too easily seduced by the pleasures of popular culture.

Such ambivalence about the term 'fan', with all its claustrophobic 'feminine' associations of merging with the object and the loss of self, reminds us of the range of pleasures and anxieties that may be experienced in the field of consumption and

consumer behaviour.^x The loss of mastery implied by the desire of the fan/collector also contradicts an important aspect of pleasure regarding the use of DVDs as objects to be played with. As we have seen through the work of Winnicott, the experience of playful possession is central when relating to objects as transitional phenomena and can work as a means of shoring up subjectivity. In contrast to the fluidity of the relationship between self and object implied by Winnicott, the more negative reading of fandom evokes a more pathologising, Freudian reading of fetishism as a problematic strategy to deal with sexual difference and the losses of masculinity.^{xi} One of the problems associated with readings grounded in Freudian or Marxist models of fetishism is that they work pessimistically to reinforce a particular narrative of masculinity in crisis which leaves little room for manoeuvre. This raises serious questions about the possibility of agency and creative reinvention growing out of this now rather dated position. By contrast, the Winnicottian position we have been exploring here opens up new spaces for discussion and exploration of how the shifting terrain of masculinity might now be articulated.

There has been a wealth of commentary on the changing status of heterosexual masculinities over the past twenty years in which it is often argued that contemporary western societies are witnessing a crisis of masculinity. Whether this alleged 'crisis' represents a positive shift towards more reflexive, emotional masculinities has been the subject of much debate in cultural studies (Segal 1990; Kirkham and Thumim 1993, 1995; Minsky 1998). More recently, there has been a proliferation of popular discourses around what masculinity is supposed to mean, with the poles of the debate being signalled on the one hand as 'metrosexuality' (a feminised state of masculinity) and on the other, as a more macho mode of 'manliness' (often described as 'retrosexual') (Harris 2006; Mansfield 2006).

As we have discussed elsewhere, this theme of masculinity in crisis has been central to recent popular cinematic representations of men (Authors 2005) and the films upon which our case study centres are indicative of this. What is of interest here is the way in which DVD consumption and the related cultural activity surrounding it appear to contribute to the on-going process of masculinity finding ways to renew itself in relation to the uncertainties of the contemporary cultural context. Consumption, then, seems to provide an arena in which men are able to explore the transitions of masculinity within a symbolic and material environment. Films and DVDs which foreground this thematic of masculinity in transition seem to have

particular resonance in this context, especially when the material objects surrounding them tap directly into the concerns evoked by the films. How does the consumption of such films on DVD create new spaces in which men can perform masculinity in ways that are about creative self-preservation and link with Winnicott's description of transitional processes? What are the unconscious mechanisms at play here? And, what does this suggest about the contemporary re-rendering of masculinity as a subject position?

Films that depict modes of masculinity 'in transition' or 'in crisis' raise questions about the inter-relationship between masculinity and hegemonic forces. Brittan (1989) suggests that 'hegemonic masculinity is able to defuse crisis tendencies in the gender order by using counter- and oppositional discourses for its own purposes.^{xii} Building on this work, Hanke (1992) suggests that hegemonic masculinity may work to preserve itself through a number of 'representational strategies, including images of feminized masculinities and the construction of negative symbols of masculinity'. These positions are illustrated through the recent proliferation of cinematic images of masculinity discussed above. Pertinent examples include the depiction of the emasculation through consumerism in *Fight Club* (Fincher 1999); of the 'male midlife crisis' in *American Beauty* (Mendes 1999); of the difficulties of fatherhood in *Broken Flowers* (Jarmusch 2005); of anxieties about intimacy, separation and loneliness in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Gondry 2004) and *Brokeback Mountain* (Lee 2006).^{xiii}

Following on from Hanke, while these films may appear to evoke more feelingful (and therefore 'feminized') modes of masculinity, one might argue that such representations constitute yet another strategy through which hegemonic masculinity is able to preserve itself by a constant process of adaptation. It is interesting to note that these films have enjoyed popular and critical acclaim and therefore figure prominently in culturally-sanctioned arenas of consumption. However, our interview material suggests that while men enjoy consuming such films, they do not necessarily subscribe to the notions of masculinity they purvey. For example, in response to a question about whether these films depict such a crisis in masculinity, one respondent remarked

I don't classify it as a problem of masculinity or lack of confidence. There are so many other factors involved as well, to do with politics, to do with

economics [...] but crisis of masculinity? Not really. I don't feel threatened by anyone.

A second respondent suggested that such films do not represent a crisis 'for me' but that some people may see it that way 'if they were more rigid in their perception of what it means to be a man'. In a discussion of masculinity in *American Beauty*, this respondent suggested 'It was more of an age thing for me, a kind of midlife kind of crisis thing rather than a particularly a masculinity kind of thing, a kind of analysis of suburban living as well'. A further respondent even went so far as to suggest that *American Beauty* provided 'A really good example of someone becoming more masculine, working out and stuff'.

Such comments as these suggest that the interviewees identify the key themes of the films, which does not equate to identifying *with* them. Implicit here are a number of unconscious processes underlying the formation of spectatorial pleasure, which deserve some consideration.^{xiv} Most striking of these, perhaps, is the gap between the narcissistic structures of identification taken up in relation to the filmic mode of address on the one hand and the sphere of reception and consumption on the other. In other words, hegemony works in tandem with unconscious processes of fantasy and desire in relation to identification and consumption, and in so doing, it shores up the increasingly fragmented experience of masculinity within contemporary culture, defending it against its perceived feminisation and other losses. In order to do this, hegemony does not depend solely on textual or 'representational' strategies, as Hanke would have it. Rather, it is the case that hegemony also mobilises its self-preservative tendencies through practices of consumption beyond the film text itself. The increasingly visible conflation of marketing and promotion, and cinema and DVD technologies provides new opportunities for this to occur.

Against a backdrop of technological convergence, then, Western popular culture and cinema have become a kind of hegemonic testing ground for the constraints and potentialities of gendered identities. Connell suggests that 'hegemonic masculinity' is shaped by men's adherence to culturally prescribed dominant masculine styles, which are historically-specific. Dominant hegemonic formations of masculinity are seen as 'winning' and men must grapple with these in order to establish their own gendered subjectivity (Connell 1987; Connell 1995). This is, of course, a Gramscian formulation of hegemony in which competing positions are

continually contested (Gramsci 1971). This paper sets out to signal the ways in which ‘hegemonic’ heterosexual masculinity preserves itself whilst also being reshaped through its engagement with new spaces of exploration opened up by the production and consumption of new media. Following the work of Winnicott, we wish to argue that such spaces should be seen as transitional for men attempting to negotiate what contemporary masculinity might mean. While such spaces are visible in the regimes of fan culture, where the emphasis is on a rather defensive, fetishistic mode of collecting and relating to the object, there are also alternative spaces which emerge in everyday behaviour associated with more fleeting pleasures of accidental collecting, which are not associated with being a ‘fan’.

It was interesting that across all of the focus groups undertaken in this study, all respondents demonstrated clear resistance to the label ‘fan’, preferring to describe themselves as ‘collectors’. ‘Fans’ were perceived as stereotypically ‘geeky’ and lacking in cultural capital^{xv} that would enable a more discerning relationship to media consumption. ‘Fans’ were perceived as people who would choose to spend their spare time ‘visiting conventions’ and ‘dressing up’ in relevant costumes. In other words, ‘fans’ were perceived as being too easily seduced by consumer objects and therefore as unwitting victims of the forces of consumer culture and advertising. The term ‘collector’ seemed to offer some respite from the connotations of entrapment associated with being a ‘fan’. Nevertheless, for our interviewees, this distinction often proves rather precarious, suggesting that hegemonic forces proves irresistible and actually rather seductive in the end. As one man put it,

I don’t want to view myself as a fan of anything, even though there is no escape really... I would describe myself as someone who likes to watch movies and also a collector because again, because I don’t like to call myself a collector, the fact is, if I collected something, I’m a collector. It’s just something you can’t get away from.

The layers of contradiction here are fascinating in what they suggest about the ambivalence of contemporary male consumers of films on DVD. Such sentiments highlight the insuperable pull of hegemonic modes of identification, yet also signal the desire to resist them. Walter Benjamin’s (1935) concept of ‘aura’ and its relationship to mechanical reproduction come to mind here. In an age of rapid

technological development, it is as if the chimerical qualities of the aura seem paradoxically to be both endlessly available and yet beyond reach as technology flaunts itself in a continual process of self-reinvention. This is most clearly seen in the discussions of the DVDs as material objects, as we go on to discuss.

The question of not being a 'fan' also emerged in relation to the distinction between 'ordinary' and special editions of DVDs. Our focus group discussions highlighted the fact that despite the knowing cynicism around the predictability of marketing practices, men will nevertheless opt for pleasure that comes from immediate ownership. What is more, they tend subsequently to discard the original purchase as too 'ordinary' once a special edition becomes available. However, for the men in our study, this is expressly articulated as a desire *not* to be seen as a 'fan' with a slavish devotion to the DVD market and its products. Instead, the emphasis is on the everyday pleasures of such objects as extensions of the self, which help to shore up a sense of identity. In this way, they can be seen as properly 'transitional' (and therefore transformational), as discussed above. Of course, the notion of 'the object' extends to the material form of the DVD box set itself and for many of our interviewees, this was important. For example, the limited collector's edition of *Taxi Driver* contains a substantial array of extra-textual artefacts including a collection of black and white stills of Robert De Niro and special 'senitype' single frame image depicting Travis in the famous 'Are you talking to me?' sequence from the film. The box itself is sleek, smooth and black, appearing more like a book than a DVD. It also contains a flyer for other 'classic' films available as part of the series which is represented as the 'must-see' cinematic canon. As one interviewee commented, 'It's the epitome of masculinity, the whole box because men like gadgets and boxes. This is what consumers have come to expect'.

Another respondent commented that,

It feels like a personalised collection. I've never seen anything like this before but I'm imagining this is a limited edition, this is a commemorative booklet, this is for the enthusiast. Here is a whole collection of what seems like personalised material.

The reflexivity at play in such comments demonstrates that men are simultaneously positioned as both subjects and objects of desire in relation to their status as consumers/collectors. The emphasis here on the way in which such objects appear to be 'personalised' is of interest. The push/pull dynamic of fetishism is clearly at work here. However, there is also a more nuanced reflexive understanding of the processes involved. Thus, while many of our interviewees expressed the importance of the aesthetic appeal of DVDs^{xvi} in contributing toward their desire to purchase them, it is interesting that an important part of their motivation for purchase was to use the DVDs as a mean of relating to other men, which included friends and family. The DVD, then, becomes an object not only of individual consumption, but also one that facilitates interaction between men, thereby enabling new spaces for the exploration of subjectivity between them.

An interesting example here comes from the special limited edition DVD of *Memento*^{xvii}, which has a complex array of added features on two undifferentiated disks. In order to access these, the spectator has to be knowing, competent and willing to pursue the imaginative potential of DVD as a technology. In fact, the film's unofficial website (www.christophernolan.net/memento.php) is taken up with advice on how to navigate the increasingly complex DVD added features. This highlights issues around the formation of a homosocial community in response to the perceived disintegration of masculinities, as we go on to discuss. In a sense, the materiality of DVD offers opportunities to negotiate the uncertainties of contemporary masculinities, then. The consumption of DVDs suggests the transitional possibilities that emerge for men in an age of uncertainty. DVDs appear to heighten viewing competencies and the possibilities for pleasure. How, then, are we to understand what is at play here in this relationship of the consumer to the DVD as object?

The collector's relationship to the DVD as a material object raises a number of important questions concerning the shaping of subjectivities that emerge through everyday acts of consumption. It is clear from the lack of overt fetishisation of the DVDs that men do not simply resort to fetishism as a coping strategy in the face of disintegrating certainties about their gendered identity. Instead, the use of DVDs as transformational objects appears to open up potential spaces for new modes of play and engagement with what it means to be a man. This raises questions about the place of homosociality and its function within consumer practices.

Homosociality is a controversial term. Kimmel argues that masculinity preserves itself through the enactment of homosocial bonds. He signals 'markers of manhood' as specifically relating to employment, power, wealth and status, physique and sexual prowess (Kimmel 1994). However, given the current cultural perception of masculinity in crisis, Kimmel's definitions have been displaced, because these spheres of homosociality are no longer exclusive to men. This is commonly debated in terms of the backlash against feminism and the perceived feminisation of culture (Faludi, 1991). As our interview material suggests, consumption has become a new terrain on which men perform the rituals of homosociality. For example, our interviewees signalled their enjoyment of sharing DVDs with male friends, with one man even suggesting that men like to swap DVDs between them as if they were football stickers. This elicited a claim from one man that 'you can judge a man by his DVD collection!', a claim that was wholeheartedly substantiated by the others in the group. There are echoes here of the fetishization of the DVDs as objects, but the act of fetishization seems to extend further than this to encompass the shared act of male friends viewing a film together. As one interviewee said,

My enjoyment is based on his enjoyment because I've already seen the movie [...]There's something else going on. That viewing, that sitting, that viewing is solely based on what he feels about the movie.

For many of our interviewees, watching DVDs with friends was an important part of their leisure activity and it was explicitly signalled that there is a difference between watching films with other men and watching them with women. Men explicitly value the sharing of films with other men and this seems to play an important part in the shaping of their individual and social identities. The resonances with issues around homosociality are clear here. Fetishization and homosocial acts of exchange are interwoven, but they also relate to modes of playing. Men make use of their leisure time to share films with other men and thereby display something of their possession of the object in the face of the everyday senses of loss that characterise contemporary heterosexual masculinity. This suggests that an important space of exchange that is opened up here. This homosocial space operates as a kind of transitional space, in Winnicott's sense, enabling men to hold the troublesome

experience of masculine subjectivity in ways that arguably enable them to preserve a space for hegemonic ideals of masculinity that today seem ever more elusive.

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NOTES

ⁱ See Featherstone (1991) and Gamman and Makinen (1994) for a summary of these developments within Marxist theory.

ⁱⁱ Several focus groups consisting of 2-6 men between the ages of 20 and 40 were convened in London in 2006 with specific reference to the films mentioned here and the material appeal of their DVD formats. The interview material from this pilot study is the basis of the case study presented here.

ⁱⁱⁱ In the case of *Taxi Driver*, the film was re-issued in a digitally enhanced print as a special cinematic feature on the occasion of its 20th anniversary. This coincided with the release of the collector's boxed set, demonstrating the on-going appeal of this film for men of all ages.

^{iv} The latter has its roots in sociological research rather than in literary criticism and the arts, which has a history of using psychoanalysis to explore fantasy and unconscious spectatorship (see, for example, Dyer 1998).

^v The resistance to psychoanalysis within cultural studies is well documented and is grounded in wider debates regarding the problems of universalism (Staiger 2005; Storey 1996). Part of this scepticism may also be connected to the pessimism of Lacanian theory, which focuses both on the lacks of subjectivity and also the determinism of phallic law in relation to the construction of gender and the masculine desire for possession. Interestingly, the latter invokes non-psychoanalytic studies of DVD

collectors, which also emphasise the pleasures of possession and control as key motivating factors in collecting and viewing films and TV programmes on DVD and VHS.

^{vi} For Winnicott (1971), the first environment for an infant is its mother and it is the interaction between the self and m/other that forms the basis for later cultural experience and modes of object relating and play.

^{vii} See Frosh (1997) for further discussion of these themes.

^{viii} Indeed, the Marxist paradigm of consumption, has largely fallen out of fashion within cultural studies because of the implied lack of agency on the part of consumers.

^{ix} As we discuss, this distancing from the term 'fan' was a recurring feature of our own focus groups.

^x It is often argued that fearful fantasies about merging with the object evoke primary fantasies of the pre-Oedipal mother. See Benjamin (1990) for further discussion.

^{xi} See Freud (1927). This model also relates to Gamman and Makinen's (1994) third model of fetishism.

^{xii} The work of Brookey and Westerfelhaus (2002) exemplifies such a move in its interrogation of the DVD of *Fight Club* as an exemplar of the closet.

^{xiii} For detailed discussion of this phenomenon, see Authors (2005).

^{xiv} Such processes, of course, are well-documented in film and cultural studies through the work of Laura Mulvey (1975) and Steve Neale (1983) in particular.

^{xv} Pierre Bourdieu usefully outlines the concept of 'capital' in its social, cultural and symbolic formations. Cultural capital is connected to modes of knowledge and degree of competence. Its development is rooted in education, broadly defined, alongside other processes of socialisation and plays a key role in shaping social status (Bourdieu, in Richardson (ed) 1986: 241-58).

^{xvi} For example, the special edition of *Gladiator* was singled out as an object of adoration because of its use of photography, artwork and its gold embossed cover.

^{xvii} This is designed to resemble a hospital file, replete with medical notes and diagrams.

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